

PCBs Must be Removed to Restore Hudson to Health

By

U.S. Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey (D-NY)

After a decade of studies and delays, the Environmental Protection Agency has proposed a comprehensive plan to remove PCBs from the Hudson River. This overdue decision is most welcome. Many people, in New York and in Washington, have worked for the last thirty years to make the Hudson cleaner. As a result of the Rockefeller Pure Waters program, the federal Clean Water Act, and many other actions, the river is healthier today than at any time in the last century. But because of PCB contamination, our beautiful river has the unfortunate distinction of being the country's largest toxic waste site. Now, finally, this last serious insult to the integrity of the river can be removed.

Over a period of thirty years, General Electric dumped over one million pounds of PCBs directly into the river from its facilities in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward, NY. Much of this toxic contamination has moved down the river and entered the food chain. These PCBs now pose an unacceptable threat to human health and the environment. People who eat PCB-contaminated fish face a substantially increased risk of cancer and other serious health problems. The chemicals pose a special risk to the health of children.

The EPA's proposed cleanup would remove 100,000 pounds of PCBs from the areas where they are most concentrated. The risk to human health and to fish would be reduced fivefold immediately following the cleanup. Within two years after the completion of the cleanup, the State would be able to relax fish consumption advisories.

GE, in its relentless effort to evade responsibility for the contamination, has tried to convince us that it would be better to leave the PCBs where they are. If that was the case, then it certainly would be easier than what the EPA proposes. But it simply isn't true. A decade of independently examined scientific studies has determined that the PCBs are not going away naturally. Furthermore the types of PCBs that bioaccumulate in fish and other animals, and bind to sediments as they have in the Hudson, happen to be the most carcinogenic.

GE has demonstrated, and stated, that it will stop at nothing to ensure that the proposed cleanup never happens. The company has unleashed a massive public relations campaign and is spending millions of dollars on ads that deliberately distort the facts in an effort to deceive Hudson Valley residents. GE tried repeatedly to delay the release of the EPA study and is now trying to have the Superfund law, which protects Americans from toxic waste sites, declared unconstitutional. The company objects to the law's provision that requires the polluter, rather than the taxpayers, to pay for the cleanup.

Over the next two months, the EPA is seeking public comment on its proposal. Support from Hudson Valley residents will be crucial to the plan's completion. It is

imperative that those of us who care about restoring the Hudson River to its full health make our voices heard over the distortions and scare tactics of General Electric and its operatives.